

OLD AND NEW MEËON: SPIRITUAL AND APOSTOLIC CONTINUITY

In this study we will examine the symbolic significance of the moment during the *meËon*¹ blessing ceremony when the old *meËon* is poured into the new one, highlighting the implications of spiritual and apostolic continuity through the analysis of some ancient traditions. We will then call attention to the fact that the Armenian Apostolic Church considers the blessing of the *meËon* as the exclusive prerogative of the Catholicos², determining the canonical basis for this practice, and showing its significance in light of tradition. Finally, we will describe the political symbolism of the *meËon* in the unity of the Armenian nation.

THE OLD AND THE NEW MEËON

The union of the old and new *meËon* is significant because it symbolizes the moment when the Spirit enters the new *meËon*, and this aspect is emphasized in various ways in the ritual action. The union of the two

1 The Armenian term մեռոն (*meËon*) comes from the Greek «μύρον» (*myron*) and means «odorous oil, perfumed essence, perfume» or «unguent, sweet oil» (cfr. F. MONTANARI, *Vocabolario della lingua greca*, Loescher, Torino 2000⁸, s.v. «μύρον», p. 1312; G.W.H. LAMPE, edited by, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1961, s.v. «μύρον», pp. 889-890; H.G. LIDDELL – R. SCOTT, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996, s.v. «μύρον», p. 1155). In Armenian, the term can be written in several forms, such as: մեռոն (*meËon*), «միրոն» (*miron*) and «միւրոն» (*miwron*) with the same meaning (cfr. M. ԴԱՎԻՏԻԱՆ [E. Ciakciak], *Bar-girk' i barbar Hay ew Italakan / Dizionario Armeno-Italiano*, Venice 1837, s.v. «մեռոն», p. 971) but in this paper, we chose to use the form *meËon*, widely used in classical Armenian literature.

2 The title “catholicos” is ascribed to the chief-bishop/patriarch of the Armenian Church. See, for example, the appendix of R.W. THOMSON'S, *The History of Lazar P'arpec'i*, Atlanta 1991, pp. 272-274.

oils reflects the perpetuation of the apostolic origin of the *meËon* as recalled by various traditions venerated by the Armenian Church. There is the belief of unbroken continuity in the transmission of the oil from apostolic antiquity, indeed even from Mosaic times, evoking the charismatic power of the oil used to anoint the priests, kings and prophets of ancient Israel.

THE RITE

The central moment of the blessing of the *meËon* is the rite of uniting the old *meËon* with the new one being blessed. The Catholicos takes in his hands the dove-shaped vessel, called *alawni* «dove», in which the *meËon* is kept, and three times pours it into the great urn containing the new *meËon*, reciting the first three stanzas of the Pentecost Hymn «Առաքելոյ աղանոյ» (*Arak'eloy alawnoy*) [The sent dove]:

«The Dove that was sent came down from on high with a great sound and like the flashing of light he armed the disciples with fire while they were seated in the upper room.

The Dove immaterial, unsearchable, that searches the deep counsels of God and taking the same from the Father tells of the awesome second coming, has been declared consubstantial with the Father and the Son.

Blessing in the highest to him that proceeds from the Father, to the Holy Spirit, through whom the apostles drank the immortal cup and invited the earth to heaven»³.

At the moment when the old *meËon* is poured into the new, the bells of the cathedral begin to ring, and just as on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles, a sudden roar is heard from heaven. After that, the Catholicos mixes the *meËon*, uniting the old with

3 *Jaynak'al Šarakan*, Antelias 1980, p. 269. The English translation is of A. TERIAN, *The Holy Spirit in the Liturgy of the Armenian Church: the significance of the hymns of Pentecost*, in «St. Nersess Theological Review» 4 (1999) 1-2, p. 37. The authorship of this hymn remains a debated issue, with some ascribing it to Anania Širakac'i (seventh century), others to Movsēs Xorenac'i (fifth century?), cfr. A. TERIAN, *The Holy Spirit*, pp. 33-49; H. AČĒMEAN, *Hay ekelec'woy šarakanoc'ə ew ayl cisamateanner*, Los Angeles 2016, p. 83. The vardapet Gabriēl Awetik'ean believes that the author is Movsēs Xorenac'i, cfr. G. AWETIK'EAN, *Bac'atrowt'iw n šarakanac'*, Venice 1814, p. 370, n. 239.

the new, and draws upon it the sign of the Cross using the most precious relics of the Armenian Apostolic Church. According to the Canon for the blessing of the *meṛon*, first of all the Catholicos blesses the *meṛon* with the Cross by reciting:

«Blessed and sanctified be this *meṛon* with the sign of the Holy Cross and with the Holy Gospel and with the grace of the day, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages»⁴.

Second, the Catholicos blesses the *meṛon* with the relic of the Holy Lance which pierced the side of Christ, reciting:

«Blessed and sanctified be this *meṛon* with the sign of the Holy Cross and with the Holy Gospel and with the Holy Lance and with the grace of the day, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages»⁵.

Third, the Catholicos blesses the *meṛon* with the relic of the Right Hand of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, reciting:

«Blessed and sanctified be this *meṛon* with the sign of the Holy Cross and with the Holy Gospel and with the Right Hand of the Holy Illuminator and with the grace of the day, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages»⁶.

Finally, the Catholicos concludes:

«Blessing and glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen»⁷.

THE IN-DWELLING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE NEW *MEṚON*

In this rite, the *alawni*, which is the dove-shaped vessel from which the *meṛon* is administered and which recalls the dove that descended on the Only-begotten at the Jordan River, is a tangible symbol of the Holy

4 *Kanon ṛhnowt'ean srbaloys meṛonin*, Vaḷaršapat 1876, p. 11.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ivi*, p.12.

7 *Ibid.*

Spirit⁸. This is why in the Armenian Apostolic Church the *meṛon* is always kept in the *alawni*. The reservoir of *meṛon* is filled through an opening in the back of the dove, stored in the belly and administered through the beak, the lower part of which is movable and opens by tilting the vessel. These vessels for storing *meṛon* are usually made of silver⁹, and even if the vessels are made from a different metal, at least the belly in which the *meṛon* is stored is mainly silver.

The prodigy of the union of the old and the new *meṛon* and the blessing imparted by the Catholicos with the Right hand of Gregory the Illuminator is depicted in an account by the vardapet¹⁰ Grigor Kama-xec'i, also known as Daranałc'i (1576-1643), given in his *Chronicle*. In this account, he narrates how during the blessing of the *meṛon* in the year 1605 at the Ējmiacin catholicosate, which he himself attended along with other varadpets, the grace of the Holy Spirit, infused into the new *meṛon* was manifested to all the onlookers through the occurrence of a miraculous event. According to the vardapet Grigor:

«On the last day (= the eighth day, i.e., January 13) of the revelation (Theophany), when they recited the hymn Տնօրհնեցաւ¹¹ («He became incarnate») to the hissing of the icy north wind, in the icy rigor of the air, while we were chattering our teeth from the tremendous frost, to such a degree the *meṛon* was heated with the (cauldron of) copper when they poured the clot of the old *meṛon* into it and stirred with the holy Right of the Illuminator, like a boiler or cauldron on the furnace, that a smoke formed from the boiling and rose up like mist. And I held over both frozen hands and warmed myself, and the leader of the Persians, who was *Lowl Alasi*, named *Tawowt'ala*, came to test the holy *meṛon*, brought his hand externally close to the side of the (cauldron of) copper, and his hand was heated as in an oven and he marveled greatly and shouted for all to hear, saying, "I am convinced of what we

8 Cfr. Mt 3,16; Mk 1,10; Lk 3,22; Jn 1,32.

9 Cfr. Ps 68,13.

10 "Vardapet" is the title of a Church-doctor of theology (see for exemple: R.W. THOMSON, *Vardapet in the Early Armenian Church*, in «Le Muséon» 75 (1962) 3-4, pp. 367-384).

11 See in *Jaynak'al Šarakan*, p. 45.

had heard about the *meṛon*”. And there were much more marvels»¹².

The portentous energy that is released from the urn when the old *meṛon* is poured into the new and the amalgam is stirred with the Right Hand of St. Gregory represents the power of the Spirit’s presence breaking into the *meṛon*, and is of such evidence that even a muslim, the most prominent person among the Persians who was leading the city of Erevan at that time, could not deny it.

APOSTOLIC CONTINUITY

Although it is difficult to date the origin of the ritual act of pouring the old *meṛon* into the new during the blessing ceremony, and in the ancient *Maštoc*’s such pouring is not prescribed¹³, nevertheless as early as the 10th century the vardapet Anania Narekac’i (ca. † 980), in his Վասն բարբառի (*Vasn balarjin*) [Regarding the unleavened bread] mentions this rite, speaking of it as if it were an established tradition of the Armenian Church. The vardapet Anania writes:

«[...] And just as we received the blessing of the *meṛon* from our holy Illuminator and Saint Sahak, so we have done to this day and always will. Every year when we bless the *meṛon*, we mix the old *meṛon* with the new and in this way, we bless it. From Saint Gregory and Saint Sahak until today, the same *meṛon* is perpetuated and comes down to our days, always accepting the graces of the Holy Spirit bestowing grace on the baptized person with holy anointing in the baptismal font, in the name of the Father and the Son; through the voluntary and life-giving death of the Son, by the Holy Spirit, for in this by faith is realized the holy baptism and our union with the Holy Trinity, consubstantial, to whom be glory and power now and ever and unto ages of ages»¹⁴.

In this passage Anania Narekac’i emphasizes the idea of the material continuity of the *meṛon* that is realized in the perpetuation of the old

12 M. NŠANEAN, edited by, *Žamanakagrowt’iwn Grigor vardapeti Kamaxec’woy kam Daranalc’woy*, Jerusalem 1915, p. 53.

13 Cfr. G. DER-VARDANEAN, *Mayr Maštoc*’, Etchmiadzin 2012, pp. 648-653.

14 ANANIA NAREKAC’I, *Vasn balarjin*, in *Matenagirk’ Hayoc*’, vol. 10, vv. 1134-1136, pp. 562-563.

meṛon into the new one as a result of the blending of the two. Such continuity makes it possible to establish a direct connection with the origins of Armenian Christianity, for in today’s *meṛon* continues that which was blessed by Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Thus, Anania gives apostolic significance to this practice, as a direct channel that draws on the sources of Armenian Christianity. Indeed, not only through Gregory, but also through all his descendants who occupied the Armenian catholicos throne that is alluded to by Anania in mentioning Sahak Part’ew (387?-439), the last Catholicos of Gregory the Illuminator’s direct lineage.

This apostolic root of the *meṛon*, embodied in the rite of the union of the old and the new *meṛon* according to traditions revered by the Armenian Church, would even draw from the apostolic era – not, therefore, only from the glorious moment of the country’s official christianization by St. Gregory, but back to the initial evangelization of the Armenians by Thaddeus and Bartholomew. Małak’ia Ōrmanean (1841-1918), Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, theologian and scholar of the history of Armenia and the Armenian Church, points out when he writes:

«Finally, it is a national tradition that Thaddeus had brought with him the oil that Jesus himself had given to the apostles during their travels. Our ceremony of mixing some of the ancient *meṛon* into the new, during the blessing of the *meṛon*, is based on this tradition whereby the *meṛon*’s spiritual light used by the Church somehow joins the holy oil blessed by Jesus»¹⁵.

The arrival in Armenia of this first blessed oil, received directly from the hands of Jesus, by Thaddeus, who in apostolic times would be the first to bring the Good News among the still entirely pagan Armenians, is recorded by historian Vanakan Vardapet (ca. 1181-1251) in his Գովեստ հայ ազգի (*Govest hay azgi*) [Praise of the Armenian nation]:

«When he (to Thaddeus) was assigned this land of the Armenians, he was saddened and said, “It is a cold land and the people have uncouth ways”. And they said, “Do not oppose the Spirit”, and they gave him as an aid the anointing oil, which had blessed Christ, and the Spear, and no other nation has this boast, our *meṛon*, which has constantly and always the same grace»¹⁶.

15 M. ŌRMANEAN, *Azgapatowm*, vol. 1, ch. 14, Constantinople 1912, p. 35.

16 *Girk’ t’it’oc*’, Tbilisi 1901, p. 533.

So, Thaddeus took the oil blessed by Christ with him to Armenia. When he reached Edessa, he anointed with that oil King Abgar, who lay sick, and healed him. He then passed into Tarōn, where he buried the cruet of oil under an evergreen tree¹⁷. There the holy oil would be preserved until the conversion of Armenia by Gregory the Illuminator. The latter, bringing the relics of St. John the Baptist to Armenia from Caesarea of Cappadocia, founded in Tarōn the monastery of St. Karapet (Holy Forerunner) of Mowš. Not far from that place a light appeared to him, descending in the form of an arc at the very spot where the oil was stored. Following this prodigious event, Gregory founded another monastery, also dedicated to John the Baptist, built on the spot where the holy oil had been found. This monastery is also known in ancient Armenian literature as Շիշ Իւղոյ վանք (Šiš iwloy vank') [Monastery of the Oil Bottle], as well as under other names such as Երժովտի վանք (Erdowti vank') [Erdowt Monastery] and Արծուաբերի վանք (Arcowaberi vank') [Arcowaber Monastery]. Vardan Arewelc'i (1198-1271), another prominent figure in Armenian literature and a disciple of Vanakan Vardapet, also writes in his Աշխարհացոյց (Ašxarhac'oyc') [Geography]: «Erdot Monastery is St. John's, where there are relics of St. John, and the bottle of the oil that was brought by the apostle Thaddeus»¹⁸.

This tradition, which traces the origin of the *meṛon* used by the Armenians to St. Thaddeus, has a variant that traces the oil even to the Mosaic era. In that same Monastery of Erdowt, there was a pontifical letter dated 1445 and written by the Catholicos Grigor X Ĵalalbēgeanc', also known as Makowec'i (1443-1465/6), in which we could read¹⁹:

«First of all, the sacred bottle of oil, with which Moses blessed and anointed the prophets, priests and kings. And the prophet Samuel anointed David and the other prophets. And the harlot poured it on the head of Christ, and Jesus,

17 Cfr. H. KEUSSEYAN – V. DEVRIKIAN, *Holy Muron*, pp. 5-6.

18 VARDAN AREWELC'I (=VARDAN VARDAPET), *Ašxarhac'oyc' vardanay vardapetin*, edited by H. PĒRPĒREAN, Paris 1960, p. 20.

19 The original letter is now lost as a result of the destruction of the monastery during the Armenian Genocide in 1915. However, some copies survive, such as the one transcribed in manuscript number 784, copied in the 19th century, and preserved in the Library of the Mekhitarist Fathers in Vienna, cfr. H. OSKEAN, *C'owc'ak hayerēn je-řagrac' mxit'arean matenadaranin i Vienna*, vol. 2, Venice 1963, p. 345.

after the crucifixion, blessed it and gave it to the apostles, and St. Thaddeus brought it and laid it here»²⁰.

As Vardan Devrikyan has pointed out²¹, medieval Armenian manuscripts attest to this ancient Mosaic origin of the *meṛon*: it is transmitted through israelite generations up to Jesus, who entrusts it to the apostles, among whom Thaddeus will be the conduit for transporting it to Armenia, and thence to Gregory the Illuminator. This Old Testament origin of the *meṛon*, with the evocation of the anointing of prophets, priests and kings, and the mention of the prophet Samuel anointing King David recalls the function of the *meṛon* used in the sacrament of Armenian Baptism, which also includes Confirmation and Eucharist. In fact, illustrating this sacrament to the Armenian nation that was preparing for Baptism, Gregory the Illuminator in Վարդապետութիւն (Vardapetowt'iwñ) [Doctrine] states among other things:

«The horn was the example of the anointing of Christ [...] Thence also Aaron was anointed to the priesthood of the Lord [...] to anoint according to the same model [...] The mystery was preserved in seed of Abraham, because they passed on the tradition to each other until John, priest, prophet, and, Baptist. [...] And he gave the priesthood, the anointing, prophecy, and the kingship to our Lord Jesus Christ»²².

According to ancient Armenian sources, that oil, once it reached Armenia, was mixed with the first Armenian *meṛon* blessed by Gregory the Illuminator himself²³. And beginning with Gregory, with each blessing of the *meṛon*, the previously blessed oil was added to the new oil,

20 We draw the quotation from H. OSKEAN, *Tarōn – Towrowberani vank'era*, Vienna 1953, p. 109.

21 Cfr. V. DEVRIKYAN, *Srbalowys myowronə hayoc' mijnadarowm*, in «Ējmiacin» 64 (2008) 9, pp. 74-83.

22 *Vardapetowt'iwñ srboyn Grigori* in AGAT'ANGELOS, *Patmowt'iwñ Hayoc'*, in *Mate-nagirk' Hayoc'*, vol. 2, V c., ch. 48, vv. 8-13, pp. 1500-1501. The English translation is of R.W. THOMSON, *The teaching of saint Gregory*, New York 2001, p. 129, nn. 432-433.

23 Cfr. V. DEVRIKYAN, *Srbalowys myowronə*, p. 77. See also in: M. ŽOĀROYAN, *Srbalowys myowronə ev myowronōrhnek'ə hayastanyayc' ekelec'ow awandowt'yan mej*, in «Ējmiacin» 53 (1996) 9, p. 49; K. TĒR-MKRTČ'EAN, *Sowrb meṛoni ōrhnowt'iwñə*, Etchmiadzin 2008, p. 13.

so that the grace infused in the old *meṛon* would be transmitted to the new one, and the old *meṛon* would continue to remain in the new one. In this way, the Armenian Apostolic Church not only ensures the eternal perpetuation of the *meṛon*, but also reaffirms its fidelity to the holy tradition of the Church, celebrates the New Covenant by remembering its foundation firmly planted in the Old Covenant.

This is the significance of the traditions related to the *meṛon* to which the Armenian Church remains faithful. In this perspective, it is of little relevance if the blessing of the first *meṛon* by Gregory the Illuminator is not based on historical data. We are ignorant not only of the circumstances of that event, but also of the manner in which the oil blessed in the apostolic age would have come down to the Illuminator, and how the *meṛon* blessed by Gregory himself would have been preserved and passed on to posterity²⁴.

THE CATHOLICOS AND THE MEṚON

Unlike in other Christian Churches where the ritual of blessing holy oil may be performed by a local bishop, in the Armenian Apostolic Church traditionally the ceremony of blessing the *meṛon* may only be presided over by the Catholicos. We shall proceed to describe the canonical foundations of this practice and provide some evidence from ancient Armenian historiography.

CANONICAL FOUNDATIONS

The first mention of a rule reserving to the Catholicos the right to bless the *meṛon* is found in the Canons of the catholicos Yovhannēs III Awjnec'i (717-728) included in Կանոնագիրք հայոց (*Kanonagirk' hayoc'*) [Book of Armenian Canons] promulgated by Awjnec'i himself at the end of the 719 in the synod of Duin²⁵. Canon 9 explicitly states that «It is

24 Cfr. *Id.*, *Sowrb meṛoni ḡrhnout' iwna*, in «Ararat» 46 (1912) 9, p. 786; *Id.*, *Sowrb meṛoni ḡrhnout' iwna*, p. 13.

25 While this synod is widely recognized among many scholars (see for example, J.-P. MAHE, *L'Église arménienne de 611 à 1066*, in J.-M. MAYEUR ET AL., edited by, *Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours*, vol. 4, Desclée, Paris 1993, pp. 479-480; A. MARDIROSSIAN, *Le Livre des Canons Arméniens (Kanonagirk' Hayoc') de Yovhannes Awjnec'i. Église, droit et société en Arménie du IV^e au VIII^e siècle*, CSCO 606, Subsidia 116, Peeters, Lovanii 2004, pp. 270-274), there are dissenting voices that question its existence. For instance, Andreas Ezekyan casts doubt on the synod's

necessary and convenient for the Catholicos to bless the holy *meṛon*, that is, the oil of fragrance [...]»²⁶.

A few decades later, Canon 5 of the Council of Partaw held in 768 under Catholicos Sion I (767-775) also reaffirmed the prerogative of the Catholicos to bless the *meṛon*, stating:

«Let the bishops not dare bless the *meṛon* or add (oil) and give it to the priests, but year after year take it from the see of the Catholicos according to the canonical provisions of the holy fathers»²⁷.

According to some scholars, such as Hacob Keusseyan and Vardan Devrikian, canon 9 of Yovhannēs Awjnec'i, similar to others, would not have been established directly by that Catholicos, but would have preceded his work of legislative reorganization of the Armenian Church and therefore, the norm established therein would have been in force prior to the beginning of the 8th century²⁸. Indeed, as we shall see below, some reports transmitted by Armenian historiographers would suggest that the practice of reserving the blessing of the *meṛon* to the Catholicos was in force before the beginning of the 8th century. However, canon 5 of the Council of Partaw suggests that the prerogative of the Catholicos, by then canonically sanctioned by Yovhannēs Awjnec'i, was not only currently being infringed upon by bishops who arrogated to themselves the right to bless the *meṛon*, but was the subject of other violations, such as the addition to the *meṛon* of other oil to increase its quantity.

authenticity, citing a lack of evidence in ancient Armenian sources. Ezekyan argues that it might be the desire of Mik'ayēl Č'amč'eanc' (1738-1823) "to create" the synod, in order to portray Awjnec'i as a supporter of the Council of Chalcedon, cfr. A. EZEKYAN, *Dvini 719 t' ekelec'akan žolovi patmakanowt'yan xndirə*, in «Ējmiacin» 45 (2018) 7, pp. 47-54.

26 V. HAKOBYAN, *Kanonagirk' hayoc'*, vol. 1, Erevan 1964, ch. 24, can. 9, p. 519. It is worthy to mention that in the continuation part of the canon we read that the bishops have an authority to bless the *meṛon* (cfr. the note 31 of this study for Lambronac'i's perspective) on Holy Thursday as well. This interesting fact could serve as a topic of future studies.

27 V. HAKOBYAN, *Kanonagirk' hayoc'*, vol. 2, Erevan 1971, ch. 25, can. 5, p. 7.

28 Cfr. H. KEUSSEYAN – V. DEVRIKIAN, *Holy Muron*, p. 15.

HISTORICAL SOURCES

The historian Uxtanēs, who lived in the 10th century and authored a Պատմութիւն Հայոց (*Patmowt'iwñ Hayoc'*) [History of the Armenians], provides information of great interest about the blessing of the *meṛon* as the exclusive prerogative of the Catholicos in a time before the 8th century, to which the canons recalled above refer.

He speaks of the Catholicos Movsēs II Elivardec'i (574-604), who led the Armenian Church in years when the Byzantium emperor Maurice (582-602) had succeeded in extending his control over much of Armenia's lands, and had attempted to align the Armenians with the decisions from Chalcedon. Uxtanēs recalls how, when Catholicos Movsēs died in 604, a new Byzantine-Persian war that had broken out the year before prevented the election of a new Catholicos. Therefore, the catholicosal seat remained vacant for three years and was ministered by the vardapet Vrtanēs K'ertoł as *locum tenens*. During this period, Vrtanēs could only distribute to the various dioceses the *meṛon* blessed by the late Catholicos until the election of the new Catholicos, Abraham I Ałbatanec'i (607-615). The latter, as soon as he was elected, immediately presided over the ceremony of blessing the new *meṛon*²⁹. Although Uxtanēs does not state this explicitly, it seems to be understood from his narrative that despite the urgency of having of the new *meṛon*, neither the *locum tenens* nor the other Armenian bishops were entitled to bless it, so that the appointment of the new Catholicos had to be awaited. Therefore, the exclusive prerogative of the Catholicos regarding the blessing of the *meṛon* seems to have been recognized at least a century before the canon of Yovhannēs Awjnec'i.

After the 8th century, evidence about the exclusive prerogative of the Catholicos in the blessing of the *meṛon* multiplies. In the 10th cen-

29 The text of Uxtanēs is available in two editions. For passages related to the narrated episode, see OWXTANĒS EPISKOPOS, *Patmowt'iwñ Hayoc'*, Vałaršapt 1871, part II, ch. 39, pp. 67-68 and OWXTANĒS EPISKOPOS, *Patmowt'iwñ Hayoc'*, edited by P. YOVHANNISEAN and G. MADOYEAN, in Z. EKAWEAN, edited by, *Matenagirk' Hayoc'*, vol. 15, X c., book II, Antelias 2012, ch. 39, vv. 1-9, p. 555. For the more general historical context describing the period of Emperor Maurice (late 6th and early 7th c.) see in: G. DÉDÉYAN, a cura di, *Histoire du peuple arménien*, Privat, Toulouse 2007², pp. 202-205, trans. it. of the 1st edition: A. ARSLAN – B.L. ZEKIYAN, a cura di, *Storia degli armeni*, Milano 2002, pp. 144-145; A. MAHÉ – J.-P. MAHÉ, *Histoire de l'Arménie des origines à nos jours*, Paris 2012, pp. 100-102.

ture, for example, we know that Bishop Yakob Siwnec'i, while refusing to obey the Catholicos Ananias I Mokac'i (946-968), did not dare to bless the *meṛon*; he asked the Catholicos of the Caucasian-Albanian Church to bless it instead. Therefore, the bishop did not want to go so far as to trample on the tradition now in place in the Armenian Church³⁰.

Another authoritative testimony on the distribution of the *meṛon* as the exclusive prerogative of the Catholicos is provided to us by the celebrated Nersēs Lambronac'i, archbishop of Tarsus (1153/4-1198), who in dealing with the ecclesiastical orders again reiterates the authority of the Catholicos in this matter. By illustrating the competence of the different orders of the clergy, regarding the jurisdiction of the Catholicos, Lambronac'i writes:

«(In the same rank as the archbishops are) the Catholicoi, which is translated “universal”, but they have a greater honor than the archbishop, not only in his eparchy, but in all places where his peoples and countrymen are, has the right to ordain bishops for them and to give the *meṛon*, for this he is called Catholicos»³¹.

The passages considered allow us to assume that the Armenian Apostolic Church reserved the blessing of the *meṛon* for the Catholicos at least from the time of Movsēs Elivardec'i from the end of the sixth century. However, the need to reiterate this prerogative in two synods held a few years apart in the 8th century suggests that the respect was frequently broken.

POLITICAL VALUE OF THE MEṚON, SYMBOL OF THE NATION'S UNITY

The episode from the work of Uxtanēs which we mentioned above also testifies as to how the *meṛon* represented the element around which

30 The incident is reported by the historian Step'annos Ōrbēlean in a section of his work devoted to the relations between the catholicos Anania, the Caucasian-Albanian Church and the metropolitan of Siwnik', see STEP'ANNOS ŌRBĒLEAN, *Patmowt'iwñ nahangin Sisakan*, Tbilis 1910, pp. 274-287.

31 NERSĒS LAMBRONAC'I, *Xorhrdacowt'iwñk' i kargs ekelec'woy ew meknowt'iwñ xorhrdoy pataragin*, Venice 1847, p. 83. We note that Lambronac'i a few lines above states that archbishops could bless the *meṛon* for their eparchy. This is an interesting statement that could be the subject of future research.

the Armenian Church regained its unity at a time when the Byzantines, controlling much of the national territory, had under their political control many of the Armenian eparchies that from the point of view of ecclesiastical jurisdiction depended on the Catholicos residing in the part of Armenia controlled by the Persians. The clergy of the various Armenian eparchies, whether they were located in territory annexed by the *Byzantines* or on that belonging to the Persians, depended upon the Catholicos for *meṛon*. Therefore, the act of obtaining the newly-blessed *meṛon* from the new Catholicos represented, on the part of the hierarchies of these dioceses, a renewed submission to the Armenian Apostolic Church; all the more significant is that it took place at a time when the Byzantines attempted to subject the Armenians to Chalcedon. In this sense, the episode of Bishop Yakob Siwnec'i, who in order to obtain the *meṛon*, turned to the Catholicos of the Caucasian-Albanian Church rather than to the head of the Armenian Church, should not be understood as a simple act of insubordination with respect to the Armenian Catholicos Ananias Mokac'i. Instead, it should be read as a kind of manifestation of his closeness, perhaps even adherence, to the Caucasian-Albanian Church which in those years had particularly tense relations with the Armenian Church, and made no secret of its Chalcedonian sympathies³².

Alongside its religious significance, however, the act of the clergy going to the Armenian Catholicos to receive the *meṛon*, in a context such as that between the late sixth and early seventh centuries, when Armenia was the subject of territorial contention between the Byzantines and Persians, could not fail to assume a political value as well. Indeed, it placed emphasis on the unity of the Armenian nation around its Church, highlighting how, beyond territorial divisions and foreign domination, Armenians recognized the head of their Church as their leader.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the first canon to reserve to the Catholicos the authority to bless the *meṛon* has come down to us under the name of Yovhannēs Awjrec'i, the Catholicos to whom, thanks in part to the work of one of his predecessors Sahak III Jorop'orec'i (677-703), the

32 On the historical context of Armenian-Albanian Church relations, including the episode of Bishop Yakob Siwnec'i, see: M. BAI, *Le relazioni tra la Chiesa armena e la Chiesa albana tra IX e XI sec.*, in C. BAFFIONI – R.B. FINAZZI – A. PASSONI DEL- L'ACQUA – E. VERGANI, a cura di, *Storia e pensiero religioso nel Vicino Oriente. L'Età bagratide, Maimonide, Afraate*, Biblioteca Ambrosiana – Bulzoni Editore, Milano 2014, pp. 39-59.

Arabs who then controlled Armenia also recognized the role of political interlocutor representative of his entire nation. Yovhannēs would even go so far as to establish a kind of concordat between the caliphate and the Armenian Church³³.

The importance of the head of the Church as a symbol of the spiritual but also political unity of the nation explains the Byzantine attempts to interrupt the sequence of catholicos so as to integrate the Armenians more easily into the Empire, depriving them at once of spiritual leadership and the element that embodied national identity.

In the 11th century, after the reconquest of Armenian lands by the dynasty of the Macedonian emperors, upon the death of Catholicos Xaç'ik II Anec'i (1054-1060), Emperor Constantine X Ducas (1059-1067) tried to prevent the election of a successor, and the See remained vacant until 1065. But already Xaç'ik's predecessor and uncle Petros I Getadarj (1019-1058) had feared a similar fate when he was forced by Constantine IX Monomachus (1042-1055) to go to Constantinople, so much so that before leaving Armenia he apparently anointed his nephew to succeed him³⁴. In this regard, according to the historian Matt'ēos Urhayec'i († 1144), Petros Getadarj, forced to go among the Byzantines, fearing that he would not be able to return to Armenia, reportedly expressed his concern that the continuity of the blessing of the *meṛon* from catholicos to catholicos would be interrupted. For this reason, he blessed a large quantity of oil, and to prevent the Byzantines from seizing it, «he hid the new oil in the Ahowr (= Akhuryan) River, in iron vessels, about four hundred pounds, to prevent the oil from falling into the hands of the Greeks, and it has been preserved to this day»³⁵.

33 The expression is from J.-P. MAHÉ, *Confession religieuse et identité nationale dans l'Église Arménienne du VII^e au XI^e siècle*, in N.G. GARSOÏAN – J.P. MAHÉ, edited by, *Des Parthes au Califat. Quatre leçons sur la formation de l'identité arménienne*, [Travaux et mémoires du Centre de recherche d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, Monographies 10], De Boccard, Paris 1997, p. 65. For Armenian sources see: YOVHANNĒS DRASXANAKERTC'I, *Patmowt'own Hayoc'*, Tbilisi 1912, reprinted edited by K.H. MAKSOUDIAN, Caravan Books, Delmar NY 1980, pp. 102-104 e KIRAKOS GANJAKEC'I, *Patmowt'yown Hayoc'*, edited by K.A. MELIK'-ŌHANĴANYAN, Erevan 1961, p. 68.

34 The religious history of this period is reconstructed by J.-P. MAHE, *L'Église arménienne de 611 à 1066*, pp. 511-513, 529-531; G. DÉDÉYAN, *Histoire du peuple arménien*, pp. 320-323; A. MAHÉ – J.-P. MAHÉ, *Histoire de l'Arménie*, pp. 165-169.

35 MATT'ĒOS OWRHAYEC'I, *Žamanakagrowt'own*, Valaršapat 1898, p. 104.

With this act, Petros Getadarj, who a few years earlier had participated in the negotiations that had led the Armenians to cede the city of Ani to the Byzantines (thus marking the end of Armenia as a state and political entity), had intended to safeguard the spiritual and apostolic continuity of the Armenian Church. He also ensured the survival of the only institution still capable of embodying the entire Armenian nation and also defending its political demands before Byzantium.

CONCLUSION

The *meṛon* blessing ceremony holds deep symbolic significance in the Armenian Apostolic Church, representing spiritual continuity and apostolic tradition. The exclusive prerogative of the Catholicos to perform this ceremony underscores the importance placed on this ritual within the church. Additionally, the *meṛon* serves as a powerful symbol of unity for the Armenian nation, reflecting their shared history and identity. Through our exploration of these themes, we gain a deeper understanding of the cultural, religious, and political significance of the *meṛon* in the Armenian nation. Therefore, the union of the old and the new *meṛon* in the Armenian Apostolic Church is not only a symbol of the transmission of grace and continuity of tradition, but also a powerful statement of national unity and resistance against external attempts at domination and division. The exclusivity of the Catholicos in blessing the *meṛon* reinforces his role as the spiritual and political leader of the Armenian people, ensuring their coherence and identity even in the face of external pressures. The *meṛon* stands as a potent symbol of the Armenian nation's resilience, unity, and commitment to its sacred traditions, reminding all of the deep historical roots that connect the Armenian people to their apostolic origins.

REV. FATHER BSAG HOVIG TEPIRJIAN

Ամփոփում

ՀԻՆ ԵՒ ՆՈՐ ՄԵՌՈՆ – ԱՌԱՔԵԼԱԿԱՆ ԵՒ ՀՈԳԵԿԱՆՈՒԹԵԱՆ ՇԱՐՈՒՆԱԿԱԿԱՆՈՒԹԻՒՆ

ՊՍԱԿ ՎՐԴ. ԹԷՓԻՐՃԵԱՆ

Ներկայ հետազոտութեամբ փորձեցինք ուսումնասիրել մեռոնի օրհնութեան արարողութեան խորհրդանշական նշանակութիւնը՝ ուշադրութիւն դարձնելով, մասնաւորապէս, այն ծիսական արարքին, երբ հին մեռոնը կը միաւորուի նորին հետ:

Տեսանք թէ ինչպէս այս գործընթացը Հայ Եկեղեցւոյ աւանդութեան մէջ կ'ընկալուի որպէս անոր առաքելական եւ հոգեկանութեան շարունակականութեան երաշխիք: Պատմական եւ կանոնական վկայութիւններու լոյսին տակ վերլուծեցինք նաեւ այն առանձնայատկութիւնը, որ կը վերաբերի Հայոց Հայրապետին վերապահուած մեռոն օրհնելու բացառիկ իշխանութեան:

Այս հանգամանքը ոչ միայն կը նպաստէ Հայ Եկեղեցւոյ ներքին միասնութեան եւ դարաւոր աւանդութեան մը պահպանման, այլեւ զայն իւրայատուկ կը դարձնէ՝ ի տարբերութիւն այլ եկեղեցական աւանդութիւններու, որ տեղական եպիսկոպոսներուն եւս նման լիազօրութիւն տրուած է:

Փորձեցինք ի վերջոյ խորացնել մեռոնի՝ որպէս Հայ ազգի միասնութեան խորհրդանշիչ ըմբռնում, կարեւորելով անոր կապը առաքելական արմատներու հետ եւ զօրացնելով Հայ Եկեղեցւոյ ինքնութիւնն ու միասնութիւնը, ի հեճուկս արտաքին ճնշումներու: